

## The Audience

If you slaughter, do not cause the discomfort of those you are killing, because this is one of the practices of the prophet, peace be upon him.

– translation of a letter found in the suitcase of Muhammad Atta

I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way – all of them who have tried to secularize America – I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You helped this happen.’

– Jerry Falwell, interview on *The 700 Club*, September 13, 2001

We’ve seen so much on our television, heard on our radio, stories that bring tears to our eyes, and make us all feel a sense of anger. But God can be trusted, even when life seems at its darkest.

– Billy Graham, National Cathedral Memorial Service, September 14, 2001

When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it terms of peace. If it responds peaceably and lets you in, all the people present there shall serve you at forced labor. If it does not surrender to you, but would join battle with you, you shall lay siege to it; and when YHWH your God delivers it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. You may, however, take as your booty the women, the children, the livestock, and everything in the town – all its spoil – and enjoy the use of the spoil of your enemy, which YHWH your God gives you. Thus you shall deal with all towns that lie very far from you, towns that do not belong to the nations hereabout. In the towns of the latter peoples, however, which YHWH your God is giving you as a heritage, you shall not let a soul remain alive.

– Deuteronomy 20:10-16

“If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he shall also drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.”

– Revelation 14:9-10

### §1. God Made Strange

September 11 caught me off guard.

To know how and why, it helps to know my background. I came to theology as an evangelical Protestant. Evangelicalism is a theological tradition that develops largely through vociferous debates that erupt every decade or so. You can tell when an evangelical came to theological maturity by asking what battle was raging at the time: biblical inerrancy (1950’s and 60’s), charismatic gifts (70’s), women’s ordination (80’s), or divine foreknowledge (today). (A

war memorial for the courageous is Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* [Baker, 2002].)

These and other issues leave their marks on evangelicals. We bear the scars and the loyalties to the age-old Reformed controversies over predestination, the constellation of Wesleyan accounts of sanctification, the ever-shifting and bitterly contested Adventist and Dispensational timelines of the future, the fallout from the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy, and the repeated crusades against evolution (currently re-enacting the Children's Crusade, with about the same measure of success). To be a competent evangelical theologian is to be up on the issues at the heart of the evangelical Zeitgeist.

Going with the theological flow is natural, and nothing to be ashamed of. Yet it failed to address a grave weakness in my formation. Get me outside the familiar and I can be like a commuter who takes the wrong exit and ends up hopelessly lost in her own town, or a tour guide disoriented by a question in the middle of his monologue. I love to teach the doctrines that are less controversial, less familiar, and less interesting to fellow evangelicals: Trinity, incarnation, the Church, and so on. Yet these topics are a little newer to me, rather more foreign, and much more remote from the concerns of the people who worship next to me in Church. Every once in a while a question comes along that reminds me that their place in my world is still a little precarious.

Just such a question arose recently: *What is the character of the God we worship?* What jolted me aware of this vulnerability, and what has shaken my faith more than any other event in the past ten years, was a group of people who boarded airplanes full of hundreds of innocent travelers, compassionately slit the throats of the crew, and piloted them into skyscrapers filling with tens of thousands of workers from all nations and creeds and social circles. As they took the

lives of these thousands of infidels, they shouted, “God is great!” and dreamed of the paradise he was about to usher them into.

Of course, as a student in philosophy I had done my time weighing traditional and contemporary arguments for or against the existence of God. I had debated as an Arminian or a Calvinist whether God is just or whether justice is divine. I had contemplated the problem of evil. What I had never done is seriously entertain the question of whether the author of our universe could approve of *this* atrocity, this sickening metaphor of passenger jets and business offices turned into missiles and targets.

It was not that the answer had been obvious; it was that the question had been inconceivable. The western world of September 10, 2001 was not bothered by the question of whether God would sanction such horrors. Medievals who lived in a different world and a few crazies in Adventist splinter groups and militias on the fringes of the old American frontier might have believed such things, but they were obviously disturbed and, at any rate, they were marginal. We had more important things to think about.

When the inconceivable becomes real, worlds rise and fall. My old theological world collapsed not long after the Twin Towers. I found myself lost in my own faith.

American society rapidly found answers to September 11’s questions it found satisfying. Things have not gone so smoothly for me. Once events made the question thinkable, the answer turned out to be less obvious than I thought it would be. You see, Osama bin Laden’s flair for imagery resonates with images from Scripture. Disasters, imprecatory psalms, gruesome prophecies, and apocalyptic carnage are all part of the story we Christians have told all along. This makes the Word of God newly uncomfortable for me to read. When I read of Canaan and

Assyria I think of smoking skylines in New York and Washington. And why shouldn't I? It is not so hard to imagine finding this text in Muhammad Atta's luggage, rather than the Quran:

The great day of YHWH is near, near and hastening fast;  
the sound of the day of YHWH is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there.  
That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish,  
a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom,  
a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry  
against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements.  
I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind;  
because they have sinned against YHWH,  
their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung.  
Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of YHWH's wrath;  
in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed;  
for a full, a terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth (Zephaniah 1:14-18 NRSV).

I can already hear my fellow Christians' objections. "But the original context is judgment on the prophet's own people, not on other nations!" True, God's judgment is upon Judah and Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:4). Yet the passages before and after extend the warning to all the earth, both generally (Zeph. 1:2-3) and specifically (Zeph. 2).

"But that was back in Old Testament times! Those kinds of sentiments no longer apply today." Well, they do to the writer of Revelation 14:5, who uses Zephaniah 3:13 to describe those who remain righteous and loyal to Jesus in times of tribulation. They do to the writer of the Hebrews, who echoes Zeph. 1:18 in Heb. 10:27, and to Paul, who echoes Zeph. 1:14-15 in Romans 2:5. The God of Christian faith has not taken back these dreadful words. It is still a fearful thing to fall into his hands.

It is said to be no less dreadful for those who deny the God of Muslim faith, which according to a growing proportion of the world's Muslims includes Christians like me:

For them will be cut out a garment of fire: over their heads will be poured out boiling water. With it will be scalded what is within their bodies, as well as their skins. In addition there will be maces of iron to punish them. Every time they wish to get away

therefrom, from anguish, they will be forced back therein, and it will be said, "Taste you the penalty of burning!" (Quran 22:19-22; cf. 22:17).

Becoming acquainted with the Wahhabism that has been taking over centers of Muslim power in the past fifty years has been a revolting and discouraging experience. In some of the most prominent mosques of the Middle East, Friday *khutba* prayers regularly end with calls for God to avenge Islam by destroying Americans, Christians, and especially Jews. This Yemeni example, televised from the grand mosque at Sanaa, is illustrative:

O God, deal with Jews and their supporters and Christians and their supporters and lackeys. O God, shake the land under their feet, instill fear in their hearts, and freeze the blood in their veins. O God, count them one by one, kill them all, and don't leave anyone (<http://www.imra.org.il/story.php3?id=13093>).

My ancestral religion of liberal Protestantism prepared me for God actually to exist, but not for God to be my enemy. After reading a whole series of these invocations one day, I decided that I would proudly go to hell rather than submit to such a tyrant as this. I have no interest in fawning before the god of Wahhabi Islam, even to save my own skin. I am his moral superior.

But there's the rub: Doesn't the God of biblical faith bear a rather uncomfortable resemblance to the God of Wahhabi faith? Am I not YHWH's moral superior too?

For me, this is a new thought. As an American, I was formed in a culture that sees God as a kindred spirit, a soul-mate in whom fellow Americans find affirmation of life's comforts and refuge from life's troubles. "The American finds God in herself or himself," Harold Bloom claims, "but only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude" (Bloom 1992, 32). This image of God – Bloom calls it "Gnostic" – has naturally influenced my own. Discovering that millions of Muslims – perhaps ten to fifteen percent of the Muslim world by some estimates – would root for God and Al-Qaeda at the same time, in ways that echo passages from my own scriptures, has been the most spiritually shaking event of my life. It has made my familiar God seem like a stranger.

Everyone doubts, but everyone doubts differently. This is the shape my doubt took in the two years after September 11. What if God is not humanity's fond dream but its recurring nightmare?

I am not worried that militant Islamists might be right; I am worried that they might be biblical. I am worried that the God of biblical faith might really be like their Allah rather than like the sentimentalized deity we Christians would have constructed for ourselves.

Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom* (Oxford, 2002) chronicles the growth of a confident Christianity alongside resurgent Islam in the southern hemisphere. As the worlds of the Bible and the Quran gain more and more inhabitants, our world would just look more and more like the Middle East. *Jihad* and crusade – or at least prayers for them – would be ineradicable features of humanity's future. We would never be rid of God.

These fears of mine are dwarfed by the complaints, laments, and debates over God's character that have been accumulating in the millennia since people first started calling on the God of Israel. Nothing is really new after September 11. Why do evil people prosper so? How long must the oppressed wait for deliverance from their sufferings? Has God abandoned us? Is there any respite from his righteous anger? What kind of God lies behind such a state of affairs?

God's true believers have forever been hushing up these questions and trying to despatch them with facile answers. Their faith stands in ironic contrast to the Bible itself, which raises such objections at least as starkly and insistently as the average modern skeptic. This is particularly true in the place one might least expect to find it: the Psalter that serves as the Church's oldest and most official hymnal. Consider these opening lines from its prayers:

Be gracious to me, O YHWH, for I am languishing; O YHWH, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror. My soul also is struck with terror, while you, O YHWH – how long? (Ps. 6:2-3 NRSV).

Why, O YHWH, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (Ps. 10:1).

Help, O YHWH, for there is no longer anyone who is godly; the faithful have disappeared from humankind (Ps. 12:1).

How long, O YHWH? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? (Ps. 13:1-2).

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest (Ps. 22:1-2).

O YHWH, do not rebuke me in your anger, or discipline me in your wrath. For your arrows have sunk into me, and your hand has come down on me (Ps. 38:1).

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me! For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy? (Ps. 43:1-2).

O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses; you have been angry; now restore us! You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open; repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering. You have made your people suffer hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us reel (Ps. 60:1-3).

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God (Ps. 69:1-3).

O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture? (Ps. 74:1).

I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints (Ps. 77:1-3).

O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the air for food, the flesh of your faithful to the wild animals of the earth. They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us. How long, O YHWH? Will you be angry forever? (Ps. 79:1-5).

O YHWH, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve! O YHWH, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? (Ps. 94:1-3).

Do not be silent, O God of my praise. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They beset with words of hate, and attack me without cause. In return for my love they accuse me, even while I make prayer for them. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love (Ps. 109:1-5).

Had enough already? Then let's not go on to read Psalms 3:1, 14:1, 28:1, 36:1, 53:1,

55:1-2, 56:1-2, 59:1-2, 64:1-6, 70:1-3, 73:1-14, 83:1-8, all of 88, all of 90, 103:1-11, all of 120,

all of 137, 140:1-11, all of 142, and all of 143. It seems the faithful have a chronic problem trusting the one in whom they trust.

These outcries have gone up every day for millennia. They come especially from Christians who pray the Daily Office. Anglicans cycle through the Psalms every seven weeks. Eastern Orthodox monks do it weekly. That is a lot of complaining.

But is it fair to choose only opening lines? Don't these Psalms *end* happily? Not all the time, not by a long shot. Sometimes their ultimate hope sounds forced; sometimes it is tinged with desperation; sometimes it is entirely absent. Consider the following *closing* lines:

On every side the wicked prowl, as vileness is exalted among humankind (Ps. 12:8).

May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you. Redeem Israel, O God, out of all its troubles (Ps. 25:21-22).

Do not forsake me, O YHWH; O my God, do not be far from me; make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation (Ps. 38:22).

Turn your gaze away from me, that I may smile again, before I depart and am no more (Ps. 39:13).

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?" As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?" Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God (Ps. 42:9-11).

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression? For we sink down to the dust; our bodies cling to the ground. Rise up, come to our help. Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love (Ps. 44:23-26).

Rise up, O God, plead your cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all day long. Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually (Ps. 74:22-23).

You have caused friend and neighbor to shun me; my companions are in darkness (Ps. 88:18).

Have mercy on us, O YHWH, have mercy upon us, for we have had more than enough of contempt. Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud (Ps. 123:3-4).

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! (Ps. 137:8-9).

How many American evangelical songwriters have the courage to write material like this? Our people are too optimistic for our own Bible. Far from not grieving the Holy Spirit, we refuse to let the Holy Spirit grieve us.

Of course, alongside these miserable passages are many more that extol God's goodness, compassion, mercy, providence, and deliverance. In my circles these are far better known and more often read. So the debate rages – even in the churches, even in the midst of worship, even in the pages of Scripture: What is the character of God? What does God want from us? When, if ever, will deliverance come? Is God's vengeance something we suffer, we forsake, or we demand? Are there ever answers, or only the same questions? Is YHWH really a figure in whom we should be putting our trust?

As if the pressure from September 11 were not high enough, God sent someone into my life to intensify it. I keep an on-line web journal, called a weblog ("blog" for short). A year ago my writings captured the attention of a reader who e-mailed me. That message initiated a friendship with a fellow blogger whose pen-name is "Camassia." A self-described "troubled nonbeliever," she has been reading and writing about the Christian faith, attending church, and dialoguing on-line with Catholics, varieties of Protestants, and assorted non-Christians.

A recurring theme in our exchanges has been the trustworthiness of God. Is God good when he refuses to save everyone he could? Do Scripture's divine killing sprees and eternal Apartheid of the damned reveal a cruel streak in the one Christians call "creator"? Camassia is intellectually attracted to the Zoroastrian and Manichaean approach of positing two causes of everything – one good and the other evil – rather than one originator, governor, and redeemer of all things. With her secular upbringing and her compassionate heart, she is not necessarily loyal

to theism, nor is she easily persuaded by the usual claims that sin and suffering began to afflict God's good creation through the good creatures themselves. Yet she keeps circling around Christianity. She reminds me of the pre-Christian Augustine: She wants to know the truth, and is open to believing; but first she wants to be convinced that the God of Jesus Christ warrants the total trust he demands. She knows a relationship with him is not one to take lightly. She wants her own soul to be safe, and she wants her witness to others to be genuine. She is not yet persuaded that Jesus is the best way to meet these needs, let alone the only one; that her soul would be safe from him. In appraising one of my arguments for Christian pacifism, she once told her readers, "I felt a powerful attraction to Telford's viewpoint, but he did not completely convince me. (That kind of sums up my whole relationship with Telford, actually.)"

My months of blogging along with Camassia, our e-mail exchanges, our conversations and prayers after church, our participation in a weekly "Alpha" course for people interested in learning more about the Christian faith, and her friendship with me and with other Christians have always taken us back to this place. Knowing God's existence would not solve her problem; she also wants assurance of God's good character. And as I have fumbled around making theological arguments and facilitating relationships and suggesting readings like a bewildered tour guide, I have discovered my limitations as a teacher of the Christian faith. Camassia is not like the hundreds of students I have taught at Christian college and seminary. Most of them are believers whose convictions I am generally reinforcing in a basically idyllic suburban college setting. She is a skeptic – not a hardened one but a firm one – who demands an answer I have not yet managed to offer. God remains a stranger to her.

I have the feeling that if September 11 were not making God seem strange to me too, I would be better at introducing the two of them. Until I refresh my familiarity with the God I

already know, I will struggle to help others know him too. So, for me, for Camassia, and for any who wonder as they sing the Bible's psalms of triumph and lament, it is time to ask afresh, "Who is this king of glory?" (Ps. 24:10). Who indeed?

## §2. "Our Father in Heaven"

The psalm I have just cited hints at where we will find the right answer to our question.

Christopher Cocksworth notes that it celebrates Israel's God in a threefold way:

God is the creator who has fashioned the whole cosmos [cf. Ps. 24:1-2]; the redeemer who has defeated all that sets itself against his purposes [24:3-6]; the indweller, who resides with his people and makes them holy [24:7-10]. ... When YHWH, the God of Israel, is identified as the one divine creator, redeemer and indweller, this God and this God alone should be worshipped and the way of this God, and his way alone, followed (Cocksworth 1997, 125-126).

Christian faith obeys the same logic by laying down this rule: *Every good answer to every question about God's character appeals to God as Triune.*

A sentence like this cries out for qualification. We were taught in school to avoid blanket claims and adjectives like "every." Surely there are exceptions to the rule, right?

Besides, this claim suggests just the kind of obscurantism that has earned theology its well-deserved reputation for being more trouble than it is worth. To answer such a clear and simple question with such a mysterious and complicated doctrine seems to guarantee that eyes will glaze over, expressions will frown in confusion, and heads will separate from hearts. The original disciples got along without a doctrine of the Trinity, so we can too, right?

Wrong, and wrong. This claim is an axiom of Christian faith. It is a theological rule the Church has followed to keep our thinking from distorting what we know of God in Jesus Christ, and to make sure that what we know of God in Jesus Christ informing everything else we know and want to know better. Trinitarianism makes explicit the whole structure of Christian thought,

which since its beginning has imitated and radicalized “the three structures of the Jewish understanding of God” in light of Jesus Christ (Cocksworth 1997, 125). It is neither a generalization nor a speculative exercise. It is our way to honor Christ’s memory and follow in his footsteps:

“All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light” (Matt. 11:27-30).

This passage is not in the obscure jargon of scholasticism, nor even the dense rabbinical exegesis of Paul, nor even the enigmatic language of John (wonderful as they all are). This saying of Jesus comes from the same down-to-earth gospel that contains the Sermon on the Mount, the Trinitarian baptismal formula – and the Lord’s Prayer. Trinitarianism is realistic. Trinitarianism lightens our burden and eases our path. Trinitarianism is rest for the soul.

You see, the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that God is not far off when we pray, “Our Father in heaven.” Our worries about God are not attacks on a foe. Our complaints about the way things are are not bitter invectives against an insensitive tyrant. Our praises are not ingratiating words to appease a vainglorious deity. Our petitions are not meek and tentative requests before some fearful and arbitrary power. Nor are we alone when we address our Lord. So, as we say in Church, “we are bold to pray” them. Immanuel Kant dared us to know. The Church does something more courageous still: it dares us to pray.

All this is because of Jesus Christ. Since he is one of us, and since he is the only Son of the Father, praying these words puts us on both common and holy ground. The Messiah has made us insiders.

Those who learn this find it a breakthrough. It is a pity that so many never learn it at all.

In my experience, many – especially theological conservatives – are familiar with the Lord’s Prayer as something believers learned *from the Lord Jesus*. Many others, especially theological liberals, are familiar with the Lord’s Prayer as something believers pray *along with our brother Jesus*. Surprisingly few have imagined them as words believers pray *along with the Lord Jesus*. The distinctions make all the difference in the world. Bear with me while I explain.

Such “conservatives” (I am overgeneralizing, but not as much as I wish I were) are making the common mistake of conceiving the Father’s relationship to Jesus apart from the Father’s relationship to us. If the two relationships were unrelated, then we would mean something else by “our Father” than Jesus meant by “my Father.” Our Lord would just be a teacher of the prayer, not an exemplar. We would pray the Lord’s Prayer, but the Lord would not.

At first, this “conservatism” makes sense: It seems odd for a divine and sinless Christ to be praying, “forgive us our sins ... lead us not into temptation ... yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.” But if that were the case, then the “conservative” Jesus would have come and gone without changing much of anything. God’s relationship to us would be no more than a Creator’s relationship with his creatures. Still aloof from his fellow human beings, the Son would not truly be one of us, not *Emmanuel*, not God *with us* (Matt. 1:23).

On the other hand, such “liberals” (as risky and as apt an overgeneralization) are making the even more common mistake of conceiving the Father’s relationship to Jesus as no more than the Father’s relationship to every creature. Jesus would be both an exemplar and a teacher of prayer – a spiritual giant among us, a pioneer who leads us into a frontier like an avatar – but he would be no more than that.

At first this “liberalism” makes sense too: It respects the profound distinction Jesus makes here and elsewhere between himself and the Father who sent him. It seems right for a human and fallible Christ to be praying, “forgive us our sins ... lead us not into temptation ... yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory.” However, that would make God’s fatherhood something generic. “Father” would be a sentimental, personal word that really meant nothing more than the technical, impersonal title “creator.” This “liberal” Jesus would be no more than a prophet offering words like those of the first Surah of the Quran:

In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. Praise be to God the cherisher and sustainer of the worlds; most gracious, most merciful, master of the Day of Judgment. You we worship, and your aid we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom you have bestowed your grace, those whose portion is not wrath, and who do not go astray (Ali 1993).

Now this is a fine prayer, reminiscent of the psalm that introduces the Psalter. I have been honored to pray it on occasion. But there is no compelling reason to begin it with the words, “Our Father.” If this were all Jesus meant by the Lord’s Prayer, then he would still have left everything more or less as it was before. The Son would be far away from the “Father.” He would have no basis for claiming that all things have been handed over to him, or that no one but he knows the Father, or that no one but he chooses who else knows the Father too. He would not truly be *God* with us.

This is old and well trodden theological ground. A whole historical vocabulary has developed to describe people who have made one or more of these mistakes: Ebionites, Docetists, Arians, Apollinarians, Modalists, Eutychians, and Tritheists. The names are foreign to people outside my academic guild, but the ideas are familiar. One set distances Jesus from us, while the other distances Jesus from God. Other movements like Nestorianism and Oneness Pentecostalism make similar moves by distancing Jesus’ humanity from his divinity. For all their

variety, these schools of thought produce curiously similar results. All make heaven's God far away and unknowable. All leave this prayer entirely in creaturely hands.

However, *if the Lord Jesus prays his prayer along with us*, then everything is new. All things are possible. And in fact, the Lord Jesus *does* pray his prayer along with us. His prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane – “My Father, your will be done” (Matt. 26:41) – is the same prayer we have prayed ever since: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The authority in heaven and on earth he received from the Father is now our authority too as we pray, baptize, and teach in his incomparable name (Matt. 28:18-20). Our boldness to pray today owes to his boldness to pray with us for all time. Our standing as God's children, and God's standing as our Father, depend entirely upon the grace not just of “the Lord” or “God” but of *the Son* (Matt. 7:21-27).

That is what lightens the burden and relieves the fatigue. Jesus' willingness to pray along with us, not just for us, is what I need to face a world of theological bigotry, indifference, and distortion. It is what I need to face a God of jealousy, power, and holiness. It is also what I need to face my own fallen self. Jesus' solidarity with both the Father and sinners is the center of a web of connections that unites heaven and earth and eternally answers the perennial questions of our faith, including questions about God's character.

Events over the centuries have drawn theological attention towards the Son, the Holy Spirit, and humanity. These are worthy topics! Without the Son, that web of relationships would have no form. Without the Holy Spirit, it would have no power. Without humanity, it would lack fullness. Yet all this attention has often turned us away from the Father. This is a massive oversight, for without the Father, the web would have no strength, no substance.

Unlike so many of today's theology texts, Matthew's gospel showers attention on the Father. The Son knows and loves the Father (Matt. 11:27). The Father knows and loves the Son he sent through the gift of the Holy Spirit (3:13-17, 12:18). The Son shows and commends the Father to the world (7:21-27, 12:18-21). The Son knows and loves his people, cleansing and healing them through the Spirit (12:22-32). Out of that love he calls forth laborers who have the same Spirit (10:20) and are to show the same love (9:35-38, 10:1-25). He gives them the keys to his kingdom (16:18-29) and the same freedom from tax and tribute he has with this Father (17:24-27).

The Father so loves the world into which he sent the Son, sent the Spirit, and sends the Son's Spirit-empowered disciples (5:14-16). To accept the love of a disciple is to accept the love of the Father and receive a disciple's reward (10:40-42) – and even to become the Father's own kin (12:46-50) and dwell freely in his house (17:24-27) (Thompson 2000, 162).

The word most common to all these passages is *love*. Love is the Father's strength, the Son's form, the Spirit's power. Love is also humanity's fullness, by grace. Pay close attention to the links Jesus makes among love as the Father's perfect character, love as the motive of the Creator, love as the work of the Son, and love as the force behind his disciples' mercy on everyone, without exception:

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor [Lev. 19:18] and hate your enemy [cf. Deut. 23:4-7]." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children [literally "sons"] of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:43-48).

Got that? *The perfection of the Father is love and care of enemies*. Likewise, the Son's regard for the lost, the ill, the hungry, and the insignificant mirrors the Father's providence. To receive

them is to receive him (18:5), for “their angels always behold the face of my Father in heaven” and “it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little [lost] ones should perish” (18:10, 14). The face of the Father is hospitality for the very least. The Son is not the antithesis of the Father, but the glory of the Father (17:5). His heart is the Father’s heart.

Neither the “conservative” nor the “liberal” Jesus is capable of playing the Son’s role in this story. Neither one can communicate the Father’s strength to a humanity weakened and divided by sin, nor share the Father’s tenderness with a humanity hardened by pride.

Where does all this leave those who worry and lament and doubt? We have seen that humanity’s debates over God’s character are carried into the Holy Scriptures themselves, even into the sacred worship of the Psalter. In the career of Jesus Christ, the Triune God does not take sides in that debate or sideline it, but embraces and assimilates it. This happens most profoundly in the last week of Jesus’ life. As readers of Matthew, let us watch it unfold.

In his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus approaches the city as the crowds quote from the “Egyptian Hallel” of Psalms 113-118 – a collection that is traditionally sung at Passover. “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!” they cry (Ps. 118:26 in Matt. 21:9). They are announcing that the time of fulfillment has arrived at last. Jesus has already agreed, declaring that this Passover is Israel’s moment of judgment and deliverance (cf. Ps. 118:26 in Matt. 23:37-24:2). Here and at the Temple, Jesus even allows his admirers to address their Hosannas not to YHWH as in the Psalter but to him, “the Son of David” (Ps. 8:3 in Matt. 21:9-11, 14-16), because the inspired psalms testify that the Spirit-anointed Son is David’s Lord (Ps. 110:1 in Matt. 22:43). Jesus is truly God with us.

Yet we are not with God. The King realizes that rejection must precede his enthronement (Ps. 118:22-23 in Matt. 21:42-43). So at his last Passover meal, he sings these psalms of victory

(Matt. 26:30; cf. Holladay 1993, 115) only after enacting his own redeeming death in bread and wine. Then he heads to the Mount of Olives to accept their fulfillment. Matthew tallies the horrible cost of this victory as Jesus suffers Psalm 41's betrayal by a dear friend (Ps. 41:5-10 in Matt. 26:20-25), takes up Psalm 42 as his lament of pilgrimage at Gethsemane (Ps. 42:4-6 in Matt. 26:38), personifies before Caiaphas Psalm 27's hymn of trust in the face of false witnesses (Ps. 27:12 in Matt. 26:59), and endures the tortures of Psalm 22 and 69 from there to his crucifixion (Ps. 22:6-11 in Matt. 27:28-31 and 27:39-44, Ps. 22:19 in Matt. 27:35, Ps. 22:1-2 in Matt. 27:46-46, Ps. 69:21 in Matt. 27:34, 48). All this sets the stage for the resurrection that fulfills Psalm 110's song of coronation (Ps. 110:1-2 in Matt. 22:41-45, 26:64, and 28:18).

The Son is the Psalter in flesh and blood. His birth, life, death, and resurrection take on and resolve the debate over whether and how God cares for his suffering creation. Every voice – every desperate cry, every fear, every assurance, and every exultation from every innocent and every sinner – finds its place in his story.

Every voice also finds its reply. William L. Holladay notices a profound transformation in the way Jesus uses the Psalter. “Although he made use of at least one of the psalms of lament – perhaps more – astonishingly, he does not take on any of the spirit of ‘us against them’ with which those psalms are filled” (Holladay 1993, 121). Jesus’ tone contrasts sharply with the “us versus them” interpretation of the psalms and other holy texts that arose as early as the psalms themselves (Holladay 1993, 48-49), dominated among many of Jesus’ contemporaries (109), and resounds down to this day among cultists, *jihadis*, Crusaders, anti-Semites, nationalists, patriots, and ethnic tribalists. Why the difference? Because Jesus is both ‘us’ *and* ‘them’, a sinless Son who sides with sinners, a holy one who becomes a curse, an exiled son of Israel in the land of

promise, an outcast enemy of the chosen people, the Son of a Father who refuses to abandon the abandoned.

God's mercy to the unrighteous and undeserving does not limit or compromise God's righteousness, but defines it (Matt. 5:17-20). And since the Psalms' internal debate is resolved in Christ, it is resolved in us who belong to Christ, and ultimately in the world into which Christ and now we are sent.

"Our Father." My revulsion and fear melt in the warmth of that Triune love. Jesus prays the way he taught us to pray, not in empty words but also in deeds (Matt. 7:21-27). Actions, not platitudes, characterize this God and so must characterize his followers (21:28-32). He alone is worthy, but he can make us worthy too. That too is what "our Father" means: The grace of God conscripts us both as receivers and givers of forgiveness (see "Forgive Us Our Sins" below). In my church we sing a hymn that could hardly put it better:

There's no greater love than Jesus  
There's no greater love than he gives  
There's no greater love that frees us  
So deep within.

We praise your name  
Stand in awe  
Of your never-ending love  
Love so great  
That it covers all my sin and shame.

No greater power, there is no  
Greater force in all the earth  
Than the strength of his love (Walker 1996).

When we pray, "our Father in heaven," we know the pain of bearing with a world of hate, for the Son has borne it with us, and his Father with him. We know the sheer favor that has adopted us out of an orphanage of alienation into the holy family of Father, Son, and Spirit. We know the pressure of the Spirit pushing us back to that orphanage to rescue others. We know the

awesome responsibility of holding the keys to God's kingdom. We know the jeopardy of mouthing these words when we fail to live them out, the judgment upon those who spurn them, the precariousness of our safety if we persist in hypocrisy, and the assurance of restoration when we repent. We know the heart of God. Somehow none of this knowledge weakens or discourages us. Instead, this prayer brings the strength of his love. Nothing will withstand it. Twelve legions of angels cannot compare with it (Matt. 26:49-54).

Perhaps my own confusion and weakness of faith come from my inattention to the Father. Because Matthew's gospel concentrates so much attention on the Father, it offers resources for communities that are failing to attend to him. That makes Matthew not just a guide to prayer, but an answer to prayer.

Some will find that claim hard to believe. In our culture the word "father" has connotations that do not always match those of Jesus' world, let alone characterize his relationship with the God who sent him. Many earthly fathers model the very evils Jesus came to conquer. Yet whatever we think of contemporary fatherhood, we need to be cautious about importing it naively into the Scriptures. What "Father" means there is not maleness and oppression, as some feminists allege, nor superiority and control, as some reactionaries counter, but – looking again at the Lord's Prayer – attention, faithfulness, generosity, love, trustworthiness, mercy, self-sacrifice, restoration, inheritance, and accountability (Thompson 2000, 160). Even if we try to improve our own practices of fatherhood by looking to the heavenly Father (cf. 1 John 2:13-14), we must always bear in mind the limits of the analogy, for this father is like no other (Matt. 23:9).

On the other hand, if we resist using the term because we fear its common connotations will malign God, we must also remember that Matthew's Jesus embraces the term precisely

because the Father shares his uniqueness with all the fellowship. The incarnation and atonement of the Son achieve the Fatherhood of God over all his children. They bring the story of God's creation, redemption, and communion with the world to its climax. God's newly universal fatherhood transforms Deuteronomy's "hate your enemies" into Matthew's "love your enemies." Incarnation and atonement do not change God between Deuteronomy and Matthew; rather, what we see earlier is the beginning of a process that is perfected in what we see later. Jesus' career ushers in the "end-times" or the resolution of the story. It creates a fathered and fraternal community Christians often call the Church, and it reaches out with fraternal mercy to those who are not yet so fathered (Thompson 2000, 156). Yet love is who God has been all along. (We will further develop the connection between the old and the new in "Your Kingdom Come" below.)

As I imagine Camassia reading this chapter, I already hear her objecting that basic issues remain unaddressed. Why accept Trinity as axiomatic? What about the incompleteness of this supposed divine achievement? What about its lateness in time? What about those who remain excluded from the divine fellowship? Is all this ultimately just a sentimental euphemism for saving some and damning others? Does it *really* fully exonerate God's character? Even if Jesus' interpretation of the holy texts of Israel might be more hopeful and inclusive than many others, is it really more loving than her own? Isn't a "heretical" humanist or a universalist who wants everyone to live abundantly still morally superior to an "orthodox" Christian who will settle for only some?

This may shock some colleagues, students, and fellow worshippers, but I sympathize with those objections. Some of Camassia's problems with Christian life and teaching are well

posed. When she crafts an argument for something that seems better to her and we believers shrug our shoulders and say “This is how it is,” I understand and even share her disappointment.

While I do not share Camassia’s suspicion of a God who would make our world and save it in this way, I admire her heart for the lost, and I long for it to make a lasting connection with the God whose heart hers resembles. The continuing difference between her and me is not that she is the only one who sees a discrepancy between the way things are and the way she thinks they should be. I see it too. The difference is that I resolve the discrepancy by trusting in God, and she does not.

Yet even here there is common ground. The Christian thing to do when things seem askew is not to reject the God of Israel as king of the universe or set ourselves against him, as skeptics do. It is not to retreat into wishful thinking, selective memory, forced exegesis, or revised theology to construct more palatable positions, as many liberals do. It is not to dismiss the problem stoically or fatalistically under the guise of “faith,” as many conservatives do. It is not to pout and wish that things were better. *It is to pray.*

Does Camassia really think universalism would be more honoring to God and more appropriate to his loving character? Then let her pray for universal salvation. Let her do what Abraham did for wayward Sodom, what Moses did for the idolatrous Hebrews, what the King of Ninevah did for his clueless city, what the Canaanite woman did for unclean Gentiles, what Jesus did for his petty disciples, and what we do every day for those we love and even those we hate. Let her intercede before our heavenly Father and plead in the name of Christ and the power of the Spirit that no one would be lost. Maybe her secular eyes have seen something our religious ones have missed. Let her make her case – not to me, for that is not mine to grant, let alone to

teach – but to the One with the power to hear and grant such an audacious request. Who knows?

She would not be the first to discover that her opponent is in fact her advocate.

Behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.’ But [Jesus] did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ And he answered, ‘It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.’ She said, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly (Matt. 15:22-28).

The line between the greatest faith and the bitterest unbelief is nothing more than the willingness to kneel.

### **§3. Bible Stories You Didn’t Outgrow (part III): Jonah**

*A sermon delivered at Hope Community Church, Santa Barbara, California, February 17, 2002.*

We live in a post-Christian society. Many Bible stories are no longer well known. Yet a few live on. Even many people who aren’t all that familiar with the Bible or interested in Christianity know them. Jay Leno may still be able to embarrass people who don’t know the name of Adam’s wife, but he probably has to work a little harder than usual.

I am glad these stories are still well known. But when the *broader context* of these stories is no longer well known, the stories themselves lose their place in the larger story. They float free, becoming little self-contained fairy tales, and start meaning something new. (And, in particular, they start meaning something *less*.) They also get left behind with the other stories of our childhood.

By contrast, the writers of the New Testament saw these stories as little pieces of a big picture. We have spent three weeks looking at this, but we could have spent fifty-two, because the big picture is still the same. After a year worth of detailing, it would be exquisitely detailed, vibrantly colored, and deeper than anything you've ever known. But you would still see the same thing.

That big picture is the good news of Jesus Christ. It is often summarized at ball games in the words of John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:16-17).

However, some people don't buy John 3:16. It all sounds too easy. What about the one who abused me as a child? What about me? What about Timothy McVeigh? What about Osama bin Laden? “God so loved Al-Qaeda that he gave his only Son?”

If you are one of those critics, I think you have a good point.

**Jonah.** A Bible story “for kids” will help us see that John 3:16 really *isn't* too easy to be true. It is the story of Jonah.

Maybe you know the story. Jonah gets a word from God: “Go at once to Ninevah, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before me” (Jon. 1:2). Ninevah is an ancient and powerful enemy of Israel. Jonah makes a beeline in the *opposite* direction (the story doesn't say why yet) and sails away from the city. God raises a storm that endangers the whole crew. Jonah has them throw him overboard.

Now this would normally kill Jonah. But God sends a fish to swallow him, and Jonah remains in its belly for three days and nights. Jonah prays for deliverance, and God commands the fish to spit Jonah onto dry land.

Most people tune out here. But this is Jonah, not Pinocchio. We are only halfway through the story. God reiterates the command. This time Jonah obeys. He goes and proclaims, “Forty days more, and Ninevah shall be overthrown” (Jon. 3:4). The king, too theologically naive to know that an immutable God cannot take things back, advises everyone, “Who knows? Maybe God will take it back,” and the people repent. And guess what! God takes it back.

Happy ending? Not for Jonah! He’s ticked. He prays – actually, he rants: “This is why I fled! For I know you are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Kill me now – I’d rather die than live.” Jonah stalks out of the city and waits, hoping something bad will happen to Ninevah. Nothing does. Instead, God starts sending more things to Jonah – little irritating things: Providing a plant for shade, then sending a worm to kill the plant. Sending a pleasant wind, then a punishingly hot sun. The story has become a farce.

The book ends with God lecturing Jonah like a spoiled child: “You care about some stupid plant that you didn’t even grow. Am I not supposed to care about Ninevah, and its innocent animals, and its 120,000 clueless people?”

The moral of this story is basically that God loves the enemies of his people Israel, whether Israel likes it or not.

***Greater Than Whom?!*** It is amazing enough that *Israel* would be telling this humiliating story about itself. It is downright phenomenal that it would end up in its own Bible. And it is just *incredible* where Jonah shows up in the New Testament:

Some of the scribes and Pharisees said to [Jesus], ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’ But he answered them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth’” (Matt. 12:38-40).

Wait a minute! Is Jesus really comparing himself to *Jonah*, the whiny runaway? Why reach down to just about the sorriest excuse for a prophet? Why not pick Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel? In prophet school, they don't teach you to be like Jonah.

Sure, Jesus is predicting his death and resurrection. But why cast it in terms of Jonah? Why take an impressive sign like resurrection and sully it with Jonah the loser? That is like Jesus doing signs and wonders and then comparing himself to Penn and Teller.

Here is what I think is going on. It will require that we overturn two common misconceptions of God.

***God So Loved.*** First, you often hear that *people* are loving and *God* is strict, especially in the Old Testament. That is why belief in God is an obstacle to world peace. But think about it: Aren't we pretty harsh on those who oppress us? Like Jonah wanted to be? Jonah runs away because he knows that if Ninevah repents, God is *too* compassionate to follow through on his threat.

The story tells it differently than we often choose to hear it. Jonah *didn't* so love *Ninevah* that he gave them *God*. *God* so loved *Ninevah* that he gave *Jonah*. God sent Jonah to Ninevah, not to condemn it, but that it might be saved through him. (And Jonah didn't like it one bit.)

Second, you *also* often hear that the one Jesus calls "Father" is the one who holds a grudge against all humanity, and that *Jesus* is the nice one. The Father is fearsome and angry. We want Jesus on our side to soften him up.

The story tells it differently. After all, what makes us think that love of God's enemies is something that comes effortlessly to *Jesus*? This is a guy who is living under Roman occupation. His own puppet king has overseen a mass murder of his fellow two-year-olds. Every day he sees

Roman abuses of power against his people. By the time he is thirty, how many horror stories do you think Jesus has accumulated that would make our blood boil?

Forgive the Romans? Proclaim peace to Israel's oppressors? *Are you kidding?*

And in fact, Jesus *is* a rather reluctant prophet when it comes to extending God's mercy outside Israel. He can be curt with Gentiles, and when he does help them, he usually reminds them that they are beyond the scope of his original mission.

We do not have to work too hard to imagine the world Jesus lived in, because it is still here. Jews are being blamed for 9/11. Anti-Semitism is coming back into fashion in Europe. Suicide bombings in Israel are regular events. Why should Jesus, who is as Jewish today as he was 2,000 years ago, be any nicer today? Who is going to soften *him* up?

Maybe the Father isn't the bad guy after all, but the steady source of Jesus' sacrificial love and compassion. "*God* so loved."

***The World.*** But would that mean that like Jonah, Jesus has – *issues*?

Well, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you have a problem with the world? *Don't* you honestly have a problem with the world?

Let me read from an [article](#) by Tony Parsons in yesterday's *Mirror* [Feb. 16, 2002]:

"Did you see the yuppies flying out the windows of the trade center?" laughed a young man outside a mosque in North London. "That was so funny."

And I can't tell that young man how angry he makes me feel. And I can't tell him how wrong he is. And I can't explain that there are many of us who have been sickened by the slaughter of Palestinian children, who will probably now care a little less about the injustices of the Middle East now that we have an injustice of our own, now that we know that young man would be amused if our own loved ones were burned alive, buried in rubble, torn to bits.

We are being forced to choose sides. The evil idiots who crashed those planes, their grotesque cheerleaders like that young man, are forcing us to harden our hearts. That's the real tragedy of that unforgettable Tuesday.

Think for one honest minute about what we do to each other in this world. And then ask yourself why Jesus should find it easy to forgive the Romans who are crucifying him like they have crucified so many who came before him, and will soon destroy his homeland.

On the night that everyone betrays and denies and sentences and abandons him, Jesus tells his few remaining companions, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matt. 26:38). Those are Jonah’s very words after Ninevah had repented and God had withered Jonah’s favorite plant. Once again, we see Jesus putting himself in Jonah’s place. He has issues.

Tony Parsons is dead right. Suffering from sin forces us to harden our hearts. That really *is* a real tragedy of 9/11. Al-Qaeda and all its sympathizers have hardened my heart. I studied Islam for years under a beloved professor who converted to Islam from Christianity. My fellow students were mostly Muslims, and they were all, without exception, wonderful people. Now, when I think of Islam, I think of people rejoicing at the deaths of thousands of innocent people. I want to condemn Ninevah, not see it saved. I have issues. *Legitimate* issues.

This puts me in the position of the scribes and Pharisees who demand a sign from Jesus. They have legitimate issues too. So they are demanding that Jesus show himself to be *their* kind of deliverer. They want a movie hero. Their hardened hearts want vengeance. That is what makes them “an evil and adulterous generation.” Sorry, Jesus says. My sign will disappoint you. It will trouble your souls even to death, as it troubles my own.

Jesus is promising the sign of Jonah. He will be the gift to “*the world* God loved.” Even to Ninevah. Even to Israel’s enemies. Even to us.

***That He Gave His Only Son.*** September 11 *has* left me feeling a lot less warm and fuzzy about the world. It has created a new need in me: a cure for a hardened heart. But it is here that

Jonah offers more resources for healing than Tony Parsons' compelling journalism and optimistic resolve. It is here precisely that the sign of Jonah offers concrete help.

For one thing, the sign of Jonah reminds us of the prayer Jonah prayed while waiting to die under the sea (Jonah 2:3-10):

Then Jonah prayed to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish, saying,

“I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;  
out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.  
You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas, and the flood surrounded me;  
all your waves and your billows passed over me.  
Then I said, ‘I am driven away from your sight;  
how shall I look again upon your holy temple?’  
The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;  
weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains.  
I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;  
yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.  
As my life was ebbing away, I remembered the Lord;  
and my prayer came to you, into your holy temple.  
Those who worship vain idols forsake their true loyalty.  
But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you;  
what I have vowed I will pay.  
Deliverance belongs to the Lord!”

Then the Lord spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land (Jonah 2:1-10 NRSV).

You know, that sounds like it could come from the same Jesus who moves from “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46) on Friday to “Do not be afraid” (Matt. 28:10) on Sunday.

It helps to know that suffering innocently and bearing the burden of forgiving one's oppressors grieves even Jesus. In a world where heroes die senselessly, it helps to know that *my* hero died senselessly. In a world where it is so hard to learn obedience to a compassionate God, it helps that, as Hebrews puts it, even the Son “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8). When news of some new outrage begins to choke off my compassion, it helps that “we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15).

When I see all over again that we don't have it in us to love enough, that *I* don't have it in *me* to love enough, it helps to know that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are unspeakable love for their world, unconditional love, unpleasant love.

If God's love for the world is anything less than this, then we are without hope. The world's evil *will* triumph over it. It will force us all to surrender to the rage *we* feel at the rage of others.

Jonah learned obedience through what he suffered. Jesus did too. But for all the similarities, there is a critical difference. God's love triumphed *over* Jonah. Jesus is "greater than Jonah" (Matt. 12:41) in that God's love triumphed *in* Jesus. God "gave *his only Son*." Jonah arose from the deep, but he pouted until the story was over. Jesus arose from the tomb, and promised to go with us (Matt. 28:20) as we bring his peace even to our enemies.

Today that peace has come to us. Listen for the bittersweet power of John 3:16-17 as I read it one last time: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."

You can either celebrate this, or you can pout about it. You can surrender your hate to the one who refused to hate, or you can fight your own personal World War III, which you will lose even if you win.

Why don't you bring your issues to him instead?